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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000364

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SUBJECT: PUK PLENUM LAYS GROUNDWORK FOR PARTY CONGRESS,  
CRITICIZED AS WHITEWASH

REF: (A) BAGHDAD 150 (B) BAGHDAD 329

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Classified By: Regional Coordinator James Yellin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is an Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: Iraqi President and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Secretary General Jalal Talabani told RRToffs on January 11 that he had convened a plenum of 808 members of his party on January 7 and 8, and that the plenum had laid the groundwork for a PUK Congress to be convened in October. The plenum took place amid growing criticism of corruption and controversy over the resignation of several prominent leaders of its reformist wing in the last month. The plenum pardoned four members of the PUK leadership committee who had been accused of spying for the former Ba'ath regime and elected Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Deputy President Kosrat Rasul as PUK Deputy Secretaries General to replace reform wing leader Nawshirwan Mustafa who had resigned from the post. The plenum created a reform committee and an anti-corruption committee. End Summary.

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PUK PLENUM LAYS GROUNDWORK FOR PARTY CONGRESS  
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¶3. (C) In a meeting on January 11 at PUK party headquarters in Sulaimaniyah, (see reftels), Iraqi President and PUK Secretary General Jalal Talabani told Regional Coordinator

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and RRT Officers that the PUK party plenum, held on January 7 and 8, had laid the groundwork for a PUK Congress to be convened in October. The plenum, Talabani said, was the start of a new page for the PUK in which a new generation of young leaders would feature prominently. According to Talabani, the Congress to be held in October would have full authority to change the policies and structure of the PUK, and would select all new leadership, including a new Secretary General.

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¶4. (C) Talabani said he had delivered a speech at the plenum calling for party unity and announcing the formation of a reform committee and an anti-corruption committee to make recommendations for consideration at the October party Congress. (NOTE: the members of the two committees have not been named. End Note) In his speech, he also commented on the need to strengthen relations between the PUK and neighboring Iran and Syria, and said the party had benefited from its partnership with the United States and with the

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

¶15. (C) The plenum elected Iraqi central government Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih and KRG Deputy President Kosrat Rasul as Deputy Secretaries General of the PUK to replace Nawshirwan Mustafa who resigned in December.

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TALABANI SPEECH AND PLENUM CRITICIZED AS WHITEWASH  
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¶16. (C) PUK members in attendance at the plenum told RRToffs that Talabani's speech was criticized in discussions along the sidelines of the meeting for failing to adequately address party finances and public utility shortages in the KRG. Members said they had expected him to report on party revenues, key infrastructure development projects and costs, and to name who is in charge of overseeing these projects. Some suggested that he did not report on these items because he could not account for all of the party spending.

¶17. (C) In addition, informed sources told RRToffs that many members were struck by what they said was an internationalist theme in his remarks. They said that in making the external relations of the PUK a key issue for the party, Talabani was neglecting core party issues such as the status of Kirkuk and showing a strong front against what they view as anti-Kurdish recommendations in the Iraq Study Group Report. One member commented in a press report: &Talabani moved from the West to the East, but never came close to home. We hoped he would announce(a program to solve the crisis in the PUK and Kurdistan. He failed us again.<sup>8</sup>

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REFORMERS RESIGN, BUT DOOR LEFT OPEN FOR RECONCILIATION  
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¶18. (C) In the weeks before the plenum, several prominent members of its reformist wing resigned. Deputy PUK Secretary General Nawshirwan Mustafa resigned in late December, followed quickly by Mohammed Tofiq Rahim and Omer Seyid Ali,

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both members of the PUK leadership committee. The three leaders made no formal statement explaining their resignation. However, they had been the chief internal critics of corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power within the party.

¶19. (C) Their resignations emboldened observers to voice their own public criticism of the party and its senior leadership, including Talabani. Commentaries published in the independent Kurdish newspapers Hawlatee and Awena and on Kurdish blog websites say the resignations show that the PUK has strayed from its core principles and accuse Talabani of nepotism by securing plum jobs in the KRG and Iraqi government for his family members. The commentaries suggest that Talabani called the plenum meeting to smooth over a serious rift that has been developing in the party between the reformist wing and his own.

¶10. (C) In private, some PUK officials have said that the three reformers were forced out of the party by Talabani who wanted to use the plenum meeting to pack the leadership committee with loyalists. However, senior PUK officials deny that the reformers had left the party, saying that they had only resigned their leadership positions. Shortly after the plenum meeting, the PUK-run Kurdish-Nwe newspaper reported that Talabani visited Nawshirwan Mustafa at his home to allay fears of a split between the two, both of whom are among the founding members of the PUK. Mustafa has said privately that he will start a media company named Wshah that will include a newspaper, TV station, radio station, and research institute. Sources close to Mustafa speculate that he will use Wshah as a platform to criticize the party with a newly independent voice.

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PLENUM FORGIVES LEADERS ACCUSED OF SPYING FOR BA,ATH REGIME  
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¶11. (C) In a theatrical twist, the plenum took up the issue of purging four members of the leadership committee--Saadi Ahmad Pira, Aso Almani, Mustafa Chawrash, and Shalaw Ali Askari--who had been accused of spying for the Ba,athist Iraqi Intelligence Service before the fall of Saddam. (Note: In a series of reports last fall, the independent weekly Hawlatee exposed Ba,athist connections among a number of PUK and KDP officials.)

¶12. (C) On day one of the plenum it was agreed that the issue would be postponed until the October meeting. However, on day two of the plenum, the four members were given an opportunity to speak. In succession, each one made an impassioned defense pleading his innocence and garnering approval, applause, and a pardon from the assembly.

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COMMENT  
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¶13. (C) COMMENT: The plenum may have been an attempt by Talabani to: mitigate the damage done to the party by the resignation of reform-wing leaders; close ranks with Kosrat Rasul, a key competitor, by giving him a prominent party leadership position; and reassure rank-and-file party members in his leadership. Nevertheless, the hastily prepared plenum seems only to have emboldened critics of Talabani, especially on the issue of corruption in party financial operations.

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